

Spiritan Magazine

Volume 38
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 6

Spring 2014

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Recommended Citation

Nazar, D. (2014). Ukraine: A Spiritual journey in a political guise. *Spiritan Magazine*, 38 (2). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol38/iss2/6>

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Ukraine

A spiritual journey in a political guise

David Nazar SJ is a past student of Neil McNeil High School and Superior of the Jesuits in Ukraine. Writing from Ukraine, he gives a first-hand account of the recent events there.

The recent events in Ukraine are not what many news sources, even respected ones, imagine them to be. First, Ukraine was not a battleground where Russia and the West were hammering it out. Indeed, 99% of what was taking place on the *Maidan*, the central square in Kyiv (Kiev), was based on issues internal to Ukraine. Second, there was never the threat of civil war, as everyone living in Ukraine knew.

There are three separate moments in the current drama.

The first and most important moment is the demonstration-turned-revolution on the *Maidan*. This protracted standoff between an honest, popular yearning and a deceitful, corrupt government was understood from the outset as a spiritual battle between good and evil. It was unimaginable without the youth and the Church.

The second moment, while less dramatic, is more complex: the creation of a style of government based on new values. This work entails the definitive cleansing of the vestiges of

Soviet-style governance and the establishment of what the West takes for granted: transparency, accountability, fair elections and basic justice.

The third moment is the illegal intervention of President Putin in Crimea, which is less an act of aggression than an act of fear.

The root of the problem

The *Maidan* is the fourth major demonstration since Ukrainian independence in 1991. It has come to be directed precisely against the root of the problem. For three years, opposition parties have tried unsuccessfully to get the masses to confront the obvious and odious corruption of government. But people have seen that, no matter what party is in power, too much corruption, privilege and lack of respect for the will of the people remain. The signing of the European Union Association Agreement was to be a step in this direction.

From demonstration to revolution

It was the president's unexplained refusal to sign the Association Agreement that triggered the beginning of this demonstration. The youth, well-educated and with international experience, felt this sudden reversal most dramatically. When the president, equally inexplicably, ordered the violent dispersal of the demonstrating students at 3:45 one morning, the *Maidan* went from demonstration to revolution. In two days, 700,000 people of all ages from all parts of the country were on the *Maidan*. From this point, the language that best describes the events is spiritual.

It was never a battle between political parties, nor between regions of the country, nor between ideologies. It was not a battle for power.

A non-violent demonstration of youth was met with the illegal, unannounced and brutal use of police special forces.

The president's failure to sign the agreement was like throwing dynamite on a fault line: the hopes and expectations of the people were dashed by surely the most corrupt and self-serving president in Ukraine's history. The president did what he wanted against the will of the majority. The crowd could have violently taken over whatever it wanted, but at the outset not a window was broken. The people's demands were articulate, hope-filled, peaceful, with promised benefit for all and made in daylight in the open square, while the government had no rational explanation, no argument or alternative vision, only violence, usually at night.

Religious sensibility is at the heart of Ukrainian culture. All of the religions and Christian confessions, with the exception of the Moscow Patriarchate, were present on the *Maidan*. On the day of the very first massive gathering, Cardinal Husar, the most respected religious figure in the country, was asked to address the crowd. Representatives of other denominations spoke in turn. A chapel was set up in the centre of the square for services and confessions. Priests led prayer from the main stage every hour.

We, Jesuits, helped out and were surprised by conversion stories. Unchurched people confessed that they felt God was with them on the *Maidan*, that God cared about their just yearnings. There was a spirit of joy, of confidence in the resolution of what had to be done, amid the sober awareness that more violence from the government was likely.

The violence did not produce the desired effect

People were not cowed or fleeing into silent fear. The president's opponents were mercilessly beaten, kidnapped and jailed without cause — as were their lawyers. Sympathetic businesses were 'visited' by the police and residency permits of sympathetic foreigners revoked. Fifty cars carrying food and clothing to the *Maidan* were burned during the night, and traffic police were attempting to fine buses and private cars carrying demonstrators. Attempts were made to repress the media — national and international journalists were beaten.

These tactics, however, proved impotent and the government showed its only weapon, violence, and its fear.

On 16 January the government unconstitutionally passed into law limits on public association and freedom of the press, punishable by 15 years in prison. It ordered riot troops to shoot rubber bullets at night to clear the crowd. From this point, demonstrators began prying up cobblestones and preparing Molotov cocktails to throw at the armed troops. On 19 February, despite public promises to the contrary, the president gave orders for snipers to shoot to kill. Nineteen died that day, predominantly from bullets to the head and heart.

News cameras and police cameras filmed the *Maidan* day and night. They showed Molotov cocktails and cobblestones but never was a gun seen in the hands of demonstrators. The security forces later revealed that they were ordered to shoot police as well, in order to lay blame on demonstrators.

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On 22 February, Yanukovich unaccountably disappeared: there was no threat of death or violence; he was still president. Security cameras showed him and his guards loading vans and two helicopters with valuables (from a palace which he built for himself with government money) and fleeing into the night. There is evidence that he and his closest circle stole about \$10 billion each year directly from the budget via various corrupt schemes.

Ukraine has not submitted

President Putin's interest is in creating a competitive economic block. To this end he has dedicated almost ten years of his life, trying to force neighbouring countries into his Eurasian Union, for which Ukraine is essential. From 2006 until today Russia has cut off Ukraine's gas in winter twice, forbidden Ukrainian meat imports once, milk products twice and confectionary products once — all attempts to force Ukraine into the union. The invasion of Crimea is a variation on the theme.

Ukraine has not submitted but kept its European orientation. Ironically, perhaps Ukraine has something inspiring to offer at this time. These values are worth struggling for — insistently, peacefully, inclusively and prayerfully. This is a country acquainted with suffering and familiar with grief — and from this arises a hope in the fidelity of God. ■

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